

AN APPROACH TO ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

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Tools and Training Series

# Planning Action for Rural Sustainability

A companion booklet to  
Assessing Rural Sustainability



Sam Chimbuya, Robert Prescott-Allen and  
Diana Lee-Smith

May 1997

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**Publisher:** IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge UK  
Prepared and published with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), The Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), and the National Institute of Design, India.

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**Citation:** IUCN (1997) An Approach to Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability — Tools and Training Series. Prepared by the IUCN/IDRC International Assessment Team and pilot country teams in Colombia, India and Zimbabwe.  
  
IUCN (1997) Planning Action for Rural Sustainability. Prepared by Sam Chimbuya, Robert Prescott-Allen and Diana Lee-Smith.

**ISBN:** An Approach to Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability — Tools and Training Series: 2-8317-0342-5  
  
Planning Action for Rural Sustainability: 2-8317-0345-X

**Available from:** IUCN Publication Services Unit  
219c Huntington Road, Cambridge CB 3 ODL, UK  
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E mail: [iucn.psu@wcmc.org.uk](mailto:iucn.psu@wcmc.org.uk) www: <http://www.iucn.org>  
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This booklet was written by Sam Chimbuya, Robert Prescott-Allen and Diana Lee-Smith of the IUCN International Assessment Team. The Zimbabwe team consisted of Elliot Mhaka, Cephas Chidenga, Douglas Chimhande, Joseph Chizororo, Peter Gambara, Davison Haukozi, Carmel Lue-Mbizvo, Zii Masiye, John Mbetu, Peter Mfumu, John Mupingo, Constantine Mushure, Aaron Tshabangu and Unity Tshabangu. Members of the IUCN International Assessment Team also includes Ashoke Chatterjee, Eric Dudley, Alejandro Imbach, Tony Hodge and Adil Najam. The group is coordinated by Nancy MacPherson of IUCN.

The booklet is a product of two projects: the project on assessing progress toward sustainability of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC); and the project on District Environmental Action Plans (DEAP) of the Government of Zimbabwe, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with technical assistance from IUCN.

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. These publications are one outcome of the project on assessing progress towards sustainability of IUCN (World Conservation Union) supported by IDRC. The project started by bringing together an international working group to discuss the problems of monitoring and evaluating sustainable development. The group soon realised that there was little point in monitoring and evaluating unless one had an idea of where one wanted to go, and that this understanding could best be developed through a questioning approach. A set of methods and tools, including the early drafts of this booklet, were developed and tested in pilot field trials in Colombia, India and Zimbabwe.

Print production of this booklet has been assisted by grants from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada) and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) .

## About the Series

This series of eight volumes has been developed by a cross-disciplinary team for people interested in assessing progress toward sustainability. Despite differences in emphasis, the materials share a common framework and key principles. We suggest that there are four basic linked steps to understanding sustainable and equitable development:

1. Wholeness. People are an inextricable part of the ecosystem: people and the environment need to be treated together as equally important. Interactions among people and between people and the environment are complex and poorly understood. Thus we need start by...
2. Asking questions. We must recognize our ignorance, and ask questions. We cannot assess anything unless we know which questions to ask. To be useful — to help make progress — questions need a context. Therefore we need...
3. Reflective institutions. The context for the questioning approach is institutional: groups of people coming together to question and to learn collectively. The process of reflection will, we suggest, lead inevitably to an approach that is...
4. People-focused. People are both the problem and the solution. Our principal arena for action lies in influencing the motivation for human behaviour.

The series starts with the summary document, *Overview of Methods, Tools and Field Experiences: Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability*. The other seven volumes fall into three sets:

Methods of system assessment (people and the ecosystem)

- Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)
- Assessing Rural Sustainability
- Planning Action for Rural Sustainability

Methods of self assessment (for organisations and communities to examine their own attitudes, capacities and experiences)

- Reflective Institutions

Tools (for use in conjunction with any of the methods or with other methods)

- Barometer of Sustainability
- Community-based Indicators
- Questions of Survival

*Assessing Rural Sustainability* and *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability* are designed to be used together. They can also be used with *Participatory and Reflective Analytical Mapping (PRAM)*, although this is conceived as a separate method. *Barometer of Sustainability* and *Community-based Indicators* may be used with any method of system assessment. *Questions of Survival* may be used with any method of system assessment or self assessment.

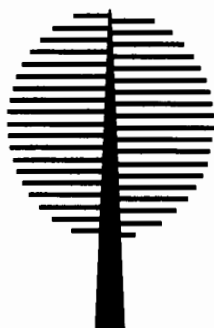
Methods and tools may have to be adapted to local circumstances, and some may not be relevant. Solutions must be people-focused to be sustained. We urge the user, when using these documents, to keep in mind the underlying approach:

- recognize the wholeness of people and the ecosystem together;
- decide which questions to ask before searching for indicators; and
- create opportunities for groups to reflect and learn as institutions.

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## Introduction

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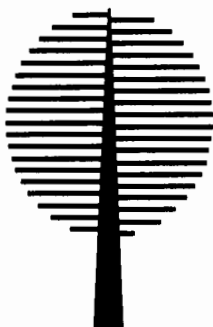
The two companion booklets, *Assessing Rural Sustainability* and *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability*, are designed for use at village level by an outside support team. They are intended to be used in sequence, with assessment leading to action planning.

The method described in these booklets uses and adapts existing Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques documented by Robert Chambers, Jules Pretty and others. Previous training and experience in PRA strengthens the use of this method but is not essential.

Two other booklets, *Barometer of Sustainability* and *Community-based Indicators*, are also available. The former explains the use of the Barometer of Sustainability as a communication and measurement tool. It is used with *Assessing Rural Sustainability* and *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability*. The latter explains the general purpose and method of developing indicators. It is intended for use with *Planning Action for Rural Sustainability*.

The method described in this booklet follows on from field work outlined in the assessment phase. It is intended to help villagers and field-based teams develop a practical action plan that has the community's full commitment and is founded on actions. In each locality an outside team is joined by a local team made up of officials and leaders from the area. The teams are trained for three days to acquaint them with the methodology and rehearse the application of the tools and methods before going into villages. This is also a capacity building exercise as well as a method for developing a partnership between the district-level officials and the villagers.

The method of planning action consists of bridging assessment and action planning, developing the action plan in the village, and then preparing for and ensuring implementation. Experience in Zimbabwe, where the method was developed, shows that the field work requires three days of meeting with the villagers for five hours a day. Other activities also involve short field trips.



## Bridging Assessment and Action Planning

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**1. Complete assessment and external data reports.** The period between the assessment and action planning visits is the responsibility of the local support team. All village reports should be completed and reviewed to identify gaps in information. The external data should also be reviewed to ensure that the information is complementary (see *Assessing Rural Sustainability*).

**2. Create a consolidated summary of the reports.** Prepare a consolidated summary of both reports. This should bring together the main findings of the assessment and key points from the external information. The key points should be shown by maps, charts and tables. A possible framework is:

Ecosystem wellbeing	Human wellbeing
Climate Forest lands Grazing lands Croplands Rivers and wetlands Other ecosystem components	Food Income Wealth and infrastructure Health and population Knowledge Institutions

The information on each ecosystem component should include changes in area, condition or quality, diversity of plants and animals, and products and services obtained.

**3. Report back to local authorities.** Present and explain the summary and hand over copies of the full report to the local council and representatives of other local agencies concerned. These reports remain with the local council.

If there is another level of local organisation (such as a ward within a district) a separate meeting is also held with that body and copies of the reports handed over.



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The purpose of these meetings is to keep these levels of administration fully informed. It also gives the local bodies an opportunity to participate in deciding how the learning from villages selected for assessment may be applied in other villages.

It is important that the team is honest about the purpose of assessment and action planning, and answers questions truthfully about what resources are or are not available. The emphasis is on the villagers developing responsibility for initiating plans they can implement themselves.

Make it clear that the objective of the planning phase is for the team to help the villagers to develop an action plan that they can implement themselves when the team leaves.

Inform the local authority that the team will make every effort to follow through on decisions that need action elsewhere.

**4. Contact potential support groups.** Identify and contact potential supporters of the action plan. Provide them with copies of the summary and arrange meetings to explain the assessment and action planning process.

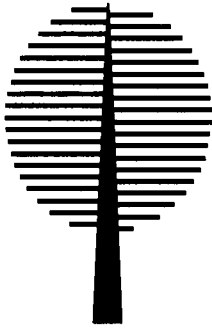
**5. Report back to the village.** A meeting is held with the residents of each village concerned, with the team presenting the summary and handing over copies of the reports to the village. The same principles of transparency and honesty apply when answering villagers' questions.

Ask the villagers to decide where the documents are to be kept and who should look after them. This is an important step in identifying and building local institutional capacity. Ask them to review the documents to check that they are accurate and that they cover all the issues they think important.

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**6. Arrange an action planning visit.** Remind villagers of the discussion on action planning at the end of the last field work session. Inform them that the team will return for detailed action planning.

Plan the next session of field work with the local leadership. Agree on a date for the meeting (one meeting over three days).



## Developing the Action Plan in the Village

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### Reviewing the assessment

**7. Introductions.** Make sure everybody present is introduced, and anything else that is the local practice for the opening of village meetings. Explain the purpose of the meeting which is to help villagers to develop their own action plan to tackle their own priority problems.

Check how well the different interest groups and sections of the community are represented in the meeting. This could be done by circulating the villagers' map of the community and ask each one present to mark where he or she lives. If an interest group or section of the community is missing, it should be consulted informally (or invited to the meeting, if there is no social or political reason for their absence).

**8. Review of basic principles.** Display The Egg of Sustainability, Barometer of Sustainability and Pyramid of Action throughout the meeting. Ask the villagers to recall:

- the Egg of Sustainability and the Barometer of Sustainability, showing the importance of improving human and ecosystem wellbeing together, and where the community placed itself on the Barometer;
- the River Game and Pyramid of Action, showing the need to found an action plan on the community's own commitment and actions.

**9. Criteria for good action planning.** Explain the ten criteria for an effective action plan shown below. These criteria should be translated into the local language and displayed where everyone can see them throughout the meeting:

- the issues that the action plan addresses are the key issues (or problems) identified by the assessment and consolidated summary;

## *Developing the Action Plan in the Village*

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- a manageable number of priority issues has been chosen (no more than five, fewer may be better);
- the actions to tackle the issues deal with causes of problems as well as effects;
- the actions are organised into programmes;
- each programme consists of an appropriate mixture of actions that the villagers can take without help, actions they could take with some help, and actions that need to be taken by people and organisations outside the community;
- the actions are practical;
- the same actions are not being done already by someone else;
- commitments can be obtained for the help that villagers require and for the actions that need to be taken by people and organisations outside the community;
- the programmes and the individual actions work together and do not conflict with each other; and
- the action plan has the full support of the community and is not being pushed by one interest group.

Explain that the role of the team is to facilitate negotiation among the villagers about what they want to do and how it is to be done. Acknowledge that everyone present has some ideas. They may be different, representing different positions and interests, (for example, men, women, young people, people without land, different groups or clans and so on). The team needs to make sure all have the chance to put their ideas across and have them listened to and treated with respect.

The idea is to come up with an action plan composed of a manageable number of programmes that together will improve the wellbeing of the ecosystem and the people. Each programme will consist of a set of actions that people (everyone or some) want to undertake. The actions should complement each other and, when done together, lead to overall

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improvement, not conflict. This is what the negotiation is about: making good, informed, collective decisions.

Throughout this and subsequent steps, it is the team's job to make sure that all interests, including minority positions, have their say.

**10. Review of the assessment.** Ask the villagers to recap the purpose of the assessment. Present the findings of the assessment and the key points from the external information. Present charts, maps and tables of information collected from external sources. Discuss the complementary nature of the two sources of information. Help them to link the information details.

### **Agreeing on problems**

**11. Problem listing.** List the human and ecosystem problems identified during the assessment. Have your own list ready to prompt the villagers if they miss anything and to find out more if they add something new. The listing will be more participatory if it is done by groups of villagers rather than by the full meeting. Each group then reports to the full meeting and the list is consolidated. Try to make sure that similar problems are put together (for example, water problems, forest problems, health problems, livelihood problems).

**12. Clarifying and ranking problems.** Villagers clarify their problems in order for everyone to understand the nature and severity of the problems. Lack of a clinic may mean a high prevalence of malaria or any other disease. Lack of water may mean a declining water table causing shortage of water for domestic purposes or for livestock. Ask the villagers to rank the problems from top priority to lowest priority. The action plan will tackle the top priority problems only (from one up to five). The number depends on two factors:

## *Developing the Action Plan in the Village*

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- a natural split between the top problems and lower priority issues. For example, the top two or three problems may command a consensus of the entire community; the other problems may arouse strong interest only in parts of the community. Such distinctions can be detected easily from the reactions of the villagers.
  - the number of groups into which the meeting can be divided. During subsequent steps, each group can address one problem. Remember the more groups, the more time must be allocated to group reports. The time calculated for the meeting (15 hours total) has been estimated on the basis of three groups.

Either or both these factors can be used to settle on the number of problems or issues that the action plan will tackle.

**13. The villagers' vision.** Ask the villagers to define their vision for the best human wellbeing condition and ecosystem condition. Check this vision with the highest condition of human wellbeing they described during the assessment. Do the same with the highest condition for the ecosystem condition. This is best done in small groups in order to capture the vision of as many subsections of the community as possible.

**14. Barometer of Sustainability.** Ask the villagers to define one or two objectives for each of the identified problems. Determine with the villagers where on the Barometer they think they will be by achieving the objectives. Help the villagers to use both scales of the Barometer and appreciate that progress on one scale only does not lead to sustainable development. Ask the villagers to show where they think achieving the objectives would put them on the Barometer. Ask them to explain how the objectives would help them get there.

**15. Cause and effect analysis.** Ask the villagers to chart the causes and effects of each problem. This is best done in groups. The problem is written

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in the centre of a large piece of paper. The causes are added (directly or on pieces of paper which are then stuck on the chart) above the problem statement. Links are shown by arrows. Go as far as possible up the chain of causes (or, if there is more than one, the chains of causes). The effects are added below the problem statement. When the groups have finished they report to the full meeting.

### Agreeing on actions

**16. Designing actions.** Ask the villagers to list the actions required to tackle each problem and its causes. Again, this is best done in groups. It is not necessary to address all the causes, but the most important ones should be covered.

**17. Pyramid of Action.** Villagers should identify the following:

- the actions they could take without assistance;
- the actions they could take with help, specifying the type of help required in each case; and
- the actions that need to be taken by others.

Once these actions have been identified:

- help them to check the practicality of each action, and ensure that actions work together and do not conflict with each other; and
- ensure that actions to tackle one problem and its causes complement the actions required to tackle the other problems and causes, and that gaps are filled and duplication is eliminated.

Remind each group about the ten criteria and ask them to check that the actions:

## *Developing the Action Plan in the Village*

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- address the priority problems and the main causes;
- are a balance of actions that can be done without assistance, actions that depend on help, and actions that have to be done by outsiders; and
- are practical.

Use this to discuss programmes where there is too much outside effort or not enough village effort, or desirable village actions are missing. Also explore what support is expected from where, and whether that support is likely.

Help the villagers recognise and change programmes or actions that lack sufficient community commitment or would not work, or would not receive necessary external support. Provide information, not directions. Do not lecture. Ensure that they have considered all alternative actions and they have chosen the most appropriate.

When the groups have finished, they report back to the full meeting. Facilitate a discussion to reach consensus on the actions.

**18. Who does what, when?** Ask the villagers to summarise on a chart what actions have now been agreed. The actions should be set out by programme: each group of actions on a problem and its causes constitutes a programme. Ask if everyone agrees. This should not be hurried. Give people time to discuss and negotiate. Provide them with information that can help clarify the likely outcome of actions, their causes and effects and their interactions.

Then for each action ask the villagers to fill in two columns of the chart: who does it? and when? This is a feasibility analysis to check out how the plan will actually be put into operation. The community needs to examine how the actions are interrelated, feed into one another, or follow each other. Asking the questions of who does what and when helps to make sense of all this and refine the actions into a coherent and workable plan.



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**19. Future map.** Display the maps from the consolidated summary, including the maps the villagers drew of the past and present situations. Ask them to prepare a future map. This will show:

- the actions they plan and their likely (or hoped for) effects; and
- the effects of trends and other changes that the action plan does not address.

This is an alternative tool for discussing causes, effects and interactions. It can be time consuming if used in addition to cause-effect analysis. Another option is having each group confine itself to mapping the actions of a single programme.

### **Planning ways to assess action**

**20. Community-based indicators:** how would you know if things are getting better or worse? Explain the need for indicators so that the community can assess the effects of the action plan.

**21. Identifying indicators.** Ask each group to prepare an indicator chart, listing the problems, causes, and actions. Then for each problem, cause and action, ask the groups to put on the chart:

- what would change?
- what would be an indicator of that change: something they can observe and measure, that would show it was actually happening?
- who has the information needed for the indicator?
- where is the information located?
- who can collect it and how?
- who will record the information?
- how often should it be recorded, so that people can know how things are going and monitor progress?

## *Developing the Action Plan in the Village*

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- where should the information be recorded and kept? This relates to keeping the information in order and also to who needs to look at it.

**22. Technical help with indicators.** Explain that members of the team will give additional help with indicators during subsequent visits. Many detailed technical issues relate to the counting and recording of information for indicators. These are often specific to the indicator. Some examples are given in the companion booklet, *Community-based Indicators*. In the field, team members should help the community with advice about proper collection and management of data, but this will be done later, not in this meeting.

During a later visit, team members should also show how the indicators can be included on the Barometer to show overall progress. How to convert indicators to the Barometer scale is explained in the companion booklet, *Barometer of Sustainability*.

**23. Who does what and when on indicators?** Go back to the chart prepared in step 18 and record the following:

- the indicators;
- who will collect the information on each indicator;
- who will record it;
- when it will be recorded; and
- where the information will be recorded and kept.

Make sure there is agreement and understanding.

### **Agreeing on implementation**

**24. Responsibility for community implementation.** Ask the villagers to review who is going to take responsibility for implementation of actions by villagers. It may be that the villagers want one existing institution to take

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overall responsibility, or to set up a new committee or entity to do this. Or they may want different bodies to be responsible for different parts of the plan.

Start by going back to the ideas generated by the discussion of institutions in the assessment (see step 35 of *Assessing Rural Sustainability*) as well as step 5 about who is responsible for looking after the documents. Build on the decisions made in steps 18 and 23 about who does what and when, to analyse capacity for taking responsibility.

Deciding on responsible institutions in this way ensures a sound basis for collective responsibility and should take some of the politics out of assigning “powers”. If several points of responsibility are identified and if funds are needed to be channelled to any of them, this channelling should be the responsibility of the local authority.

**25. Review and finalise the action plan.** Make sure with the villagers that programmes, actions, indicators, responsibilities and timing are clearly recorded (on a clean chart if necessary). Review and confirm the entire action plan with the villagers. Everyone should be in agreement. If there are disagreements, try to resolve them. Any disagreements that cannot be resolved must be noted formally.

**Note:** The first project need not be written up as this delays implementation of the first project. Assure the villagers that the District team will assist them with implementation.

**26. Close of village meeting.** At this point, the meeting can be closed with the usual formalities. Remind everyone of the shared responsibility for implementing the action plan.

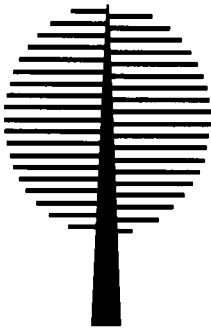
## *Developing the Action Plan in the Village*

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- The villagers are responsible for community action. Emphasise that the plan is now ready for the villagers to implement. Decisions have been made about who is to do what and when. It remains for the villagers to carry out what they have decided.
- The local authority and the project managers and team are responsible for other actions. Assure the community that you will do your best to ensure that actions agreed to be taken by outsiders are carried out when needed.

**27. Meeting between villages.** Hold a meeting of the group of villages which constitute the next highest level of administration to decide together on the project with the highest priority. After they have decided — not before — let them know if any money is available for start-up, and if so, how much. The rest of the projects will be written up by the local support team, who will compile the project portfolio for action by the local authority.

**Note:** The priority project need not be written up, as this delays implementation.



## Preparing for Implementation

### Analysing the action plan

**28. Investment analysis and portfolio.** To determine the funding required for the action plan and likely sources of the money, conduct an investment analysis and prepare an investment portfolio:

- prepare a chart listing each programme of the action plan, its objectives, and the actions;
- cost each programme of the action plan, prepare a budget, and record each programme's funding requirements on the chart;
- from the data on current investments in the area (collected as part of step 1 of the assessment – see *Assessing Rural Sustainability*), mark on the chart the amounts committed and disbursed for each programme area. Some investments may not fit exactly into a programme area or may overlap more than one programme. Make your own judgement about allocating all or part of the investment to an appropriate programme area;
- examine the total commitments and disbursements for each programme area and analyse the reasons for them. This will help identify capacity and other constraints;
- assess which investments could be changed (re-focused or cancelled) to meet programme objectives;
- identify gaps or shortfalls in each programme area; and
- prepare an investment portfolio for the action plan. This should show the funds that could be obtained by re-focusing or cancelling existing investments; and the amount of new funding required as grants or loans.

**29. Analyse what other agencies are doing** in the area in relation to the programmes of the villagers' action plan. Use the data obtained by the collection of external information (step 1 of the assessment – see *Assessing Rural Sustainability*).

**30. Policy analysis.** Conduct a policy analysis to determine the policy changes and other decisions that outside bodies would need to make to support the action plan:

- prepare another chart listing each programme of the action plan, its objectives, and specific actions;
- identify the actions requiring decisions by outside bodies. Specify the outside bodies and the nature of the decisions; and
- indicate whether the decisions are consistent with current policy or would require a policy change. Assess the difficulty of the policy change.

**31. Report to the village and local authority.** Prepare a report on the meeting and give it to each village and the local authority, together with copies of the action plan, investment portfolio, and policy analysis.

**32. Meeting of villages and local authority.** Arrange a meeting of the local authority and all villages that have developed action plans. The purpose of the meeting is to review all the action plans, resolve any conflicts, prevent duplication, and take advantage of common interests and actions.

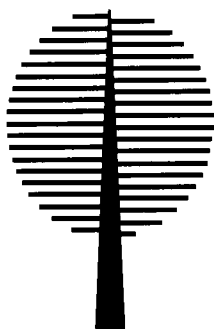
**33. Report to potential supporters** of the action plan and others who could affect it significantly. Provide copies of the action plan, investment analysis and portfolio, policy analysis, and reports of the community meetings to all agencies that may:

- provide additional funds; or
- change their policies or otherwise take action or be affected by the plan.

**34. Reporting workshop.** Host a reporting workshop on investment analysis, investment portfolio, and policy analysis. Include key government decision-makers in all relevant sectors, especially planning and finance.

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**35. Policy support.** If necessary, engage key agencies in re-focusing current policies and investments to better meet the objectives of the action plan. This re-focusing is needed if support for the action plan requires changes of policy or of investment priorities. Otherwise, the aim is simply to ensure that decisions in support of the action plan are favourable and prompt.



## Ensuring Implementation

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### Monitoring

**36. Follow up with supporters and other outside bodies.** Each village community is entitled to believe that the agreements reached will be honoured in a timely way by the government and other bodies involved. The team is responsible for following up any approvals needed so that decisions are made and funds released as required to assure implementation of the actions.

**37. Monitoring.** Establish a regular reporting format, using the programmes of the action plan and the community's indicators. Work with the villagers to monitor implementation and results.

**38. Follow up with villagers.** Report regularly to the villagers on progress with funding and other support. Stay in regular contact with the community to provide all necessary information and advice to ensure that the action plan moves forward. To help things get moving, local members of the team will initially be a more or less constant presence.

**39. Reporting on progress.** Using the results of monitoring, report regularly on progress to government, other supporters, and other agencies that need to take action and be kept informed. Provide the villages and local authority with copies of the reports.



Founded in 1948 as the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, the IUCN brings together States, Government agencies and a diverse range of non-governmental organisations in a unique world partnership: over 900 members in all, spread across some 136 countries. As a Union, IUCN seeks to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. The Union builds on the strengths of its members, networks and partners to enhance their capacity and to support global alliances to safeguard natural resources at local, regional and global levels.

The Strategies for Sustainability Programme of IUCN works to strengthen strategic planning, policy and implementation skills aimed at sustainable development at global, national and local levels. Working with networks of strategy practitioners from member governments, partner institutions and NGOs, the Programme assists in the conceptual development and analysis of experience in strategies, the development of a range of strategic planning and action planning skills, and improved methods of assessing human and ecosystem wellbeing.



**Publications in this series:**

**Assessing Progress Toward Sustainability:  
An Overview**

**Participatory and Reflective Analytical  
Mapping (PRAM)**

**Questions of Survival**

**Reflective Institutions**

**Barometer of Sustainability**

**Assessing Rural Sustainability**

**Planning Action for Rural Sustainability**

**Community-based Indicators**



Developed with the  
assistance of the  
International  
Development  
Research Centre



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